'Amplifying Migrant Voices and Struggles at Sea as a Radical Practice'

Nina Violetta Schwarz and Maurice Stierl[i]

Introduction

On Tuesday, the 24th of July 2018, the Alarm Phone was alerted to 20 boats in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea. 10 boats were rescued to Spain, 8 were returned to Morocco. For two boats we have no further information.
(Alarm Phone, 2018a)

In some sense, the events at sea on July 24, 2018 were both unique and exemplary. The twenty boats that the WatchTheMed Alarm Phone sought to assist carried different numbers of people, with each person having a variety of reasons for making an "individual motion … of desertion" and seeking to cross the sea (Mezzadra, 2004: 270). At the same time, that hundreds of people reached Spain that day highlights also political and migratory dynamics in this region more generally. Though, in the ten years prior, the western migration route had been the least frequented across the Mediterranean, sea-crossings rose dramatically and became the busiest route to EUrope in 2018.[ii] While migrant movements declined significantly along the central Mediterranean route and remained at the relatively low level of the year prior in the Aegean Sea, the intensity of Moroccan-Spanish border transgressions can be described as nothing short of a 'western Mediterranean summer of migration'. Over the summer of 2018, the phones of Alarm Phone members were constantly receiving and transmitting information about ongoing distress situations at sea. Between the beginning of June and the end of August alone, the activists rendered assistance to about 360 boats seeking to cross the sea between Morocco and Spain.

This article takes the encounters between migrant travellers at sea and Alarm Phone activists on land as a starting point to inquire into recent transformations in maritime migrant mobilities and EUropean and North African attempts to govern them, with a focus on the western Mediterranean Sea. As a transborder network that is involved in everyday struggles over movement in all three Mediterranean regions, tracing Alarm Phone's interventions can provide insights into the complex interplay between enactments of the freedom of movement and the ways in which EUrope seeks to pre-empt and deter them. We suggest that the Alarm Phone's radical practice of 'flight help' is situated right at the nexus of movement conceived in a kinetic and a political sense (Mitropoulos and Neilson, 2006).

Listening to Those at Sea as an Analytic of the Border Regime

On October 11, 2018, Alarm Phone turned four years old. It was the fifth anniversary of a shipwreck off the coast of Libya that had cost the lives of at least two hundred people – an accident that could have been prevented had the Italian and Maltese authorities reacted quickly to the satellite phone calls from the migrant boat (WatchTheMed, 2013). Over the years, Alarm Phone activists have listened to hundreds of voices of people in severe emergency situations – voices expressing torment, desperation, anxiety, panic, anger, courage, and persistence. Sometimes, they enunciated an exhausted jubilation – a rescue asset was detected, a shore in sight, a boat landing successful. At other times, these voices fell silent – connections suddenly breaking down, phones losing battery or reception, phones falling overboard or being thrown into the sea. By listening to these voices and amplifying their political demands, the Alarm Phone has directly engaged in these struggles over movement and arrival and has intervened irrespective of knowing the names or identities of those on the other end of the line. Occasional calls turned into frequent calls, dozens of boats turned into hundreds, then thousands.

Launched at the moment when the end of the Italian military-humanitarian operation *Mare Nostrum* left a lethal rescue gap, the Alarm Phone has since turned into a transborder and multilingual collective composed of about 130 activists situated in more than a dozen countries on both sides of the Mediterranean. Having entered the maritime borderzone at this critical moment in time, be it merely through a phone, the activists have become witnesses at sea, and part of the 'non-governmental turn' in the Mediterranean, with first Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) and later Sea-Watch, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), and several other NGOs sending Search and Rescue (SAR) assets to the area off the coast of Libya. While the presence of non-governmental rescue assets has fluctuated in light of increasingly vicious criminalization campaigns, the Alarm Phone has continuously received calls from those set on reaching EUrope via the sea.

So far, the 'phone activists' have aided in over 2,400 distress situations – 1,615 in the Aegean Sea, 600 in the western Mediterranean, and 222 in the central Mediterranean (Alarm Phone, 2018b). In the process, they have witnessed varying migratory trajectories and patterns in the context of an evolving politics of control in the Mediterranean. Having watched the sea and listened to people on the move for over four years, the Alarm Phone can be viewed as an *analytic of power* (Foucault, 1998: 90), or, rather, as an analytic of the EUropean border regime (Stierl, 2019), able to observe the interplay between disobedient movements and their policing – from the mass arrivals via the Aegean Sea in 2015 to their rapid decline after the EU-Turkey deal in spring 2016, from the mass dying in the central Mediterranean peaking in 2016 to the installation of Libyan forces able to violently reduce crossings in 2017 and 2018, from the relatively few instances of sea-migration to Spain in 2014 to their explosion in 2018. The activists understand the Alarm Phone as an effective infrastructure of support to migrants' precarious mobilities, indeed as a segment of an existing 'migratory underground railroad'.

Self-Organized Crossings via Morocco

The western Mediterranean is not a new migratory route but has evolved and shifted over several decades. From the 1990s onward, in light of increasing movements to Spain via the Strait of Gibraltar, Spanish-Moroccan collaborations in border enforcement intensified but were able only temporarily to reduce crossings. In the mid-2000s, arrivals increased on the Canary Islands via the Atlantic route, peaking in 2006. This prompted the launch of the first large-scale operation of the European border agency Frontex, which turned Morocco's coast into an early laboratory of EU border enforcement with significance for subsequent forms of maritime migration governance. Keen to pre-empt movements to the Spanish archipelago, Frontex intervened through operation HERA alongside Spanish patrols within West African waters, and thereby externalized the EUropean border. At the same time, incentives were offered to governments in places of departure to intercept outward migration movements, as a result of which "a hunt was on for the illegal migrant across the deserts, forests, and towns stretching beyond the Euro-African border" (Andersson, 2014a: 123). These measures, in addition to bilateral repatriation agreements between Spain and West African countries, prompted a decrease in crossings, and by 2009, the western Mediterranean route had practically been sealed off. While the re-opening of the Mediterranean frontier in the wake of the 2011 Arab uprisings led to large-scale crossings along the central and eastern Mediterranean routes, those to Spain remained comparably low.

This changed, however, when arrivals nearly tripled in 2017 from the year prior and even more remarkably in 2018, when Spain overtook Italy as well as Greece as the 'front-runners' in terms of migrant arrivals via the Mediterranean. While this shift was clearly also a

consequence of the increasingly repressive migrant containment practices in Turkey and Libya, the crossing of over fifty-eight thousand people within a year speaks to a migratory dynamism not witnessed for over a decade in the western region. Though the majority of travelers can be thought of as 'transit migrants', having come mainly from West and Central Africa, more than one quarter were estimated to be so-called *harragas* (meaning 'those who burn' borders and identity documents), Northern Africans – particularly young Moroccans and Algerians - who took to the boats. Some factors that have contributed to the rise in harraga movements include the worsening economic situation that has increased the rate of youth unemployment over recent years, as well as the increasingly discriminatory and repressive practices by the Moroccan regime against certain segments of the Moroccan population. In particular those involved in ongoing political and social protests in the northern Rif region have suffered through a wave of arbitrary arrests, prompting many who could to escape via the sea. The death of the Moroccan student Hayat B., shot at sea in September 2018 by the Moroccan Navy, has caused renewed protests as well as repression of harraga migration in the kingdom.

Ever since Alarm Phone was launched, ties between activists and people on the move in Morocco, especially those from West and Central Africa, have been close and have intensified subsequently through the creation of Alarm Phone networks within Morocco. Such collaboration has allowed the activists to assist thousands of people at sea in this region, which has in turn provided them with further insights into the modalities of western Mediterranean crossings. The case of the western route is significant, however, not only due to the increasing number of arrivals. In contrast especially to boat migration from Libya, the crossings from Morocco are often coordinated and enacted in a rather self-organized fashion. Like the collective storming of the fences of the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, though quite different in form, sea-crossings do not occur randomly but require strategic coordination. The timing is pivotal for successful sea-crossings, as the mass arrivals in Spain during football matches of the Moroccan national team in the 2018 World Cup or during the end of Ramadan celebrations in June 2018 demonstrated. More than simply being distracted, however, the Moroccan military has been involved in the industry of sea migration, with military posts along the Moroccan coast being intentionally vacated when groups of migrants take to the sea or with members of the military engaging even more actively in the arrangements allowing for the departure of boats.

In these and other momentary ruptures of the EUropean-North African border alliance, migrant subjects localize openings which they seize to escape. Those from the migrant community who stay behind on land are part of a 'safety system' that seeks to make precarious crossings a little bit safer. They try to stay in contact with the boat via mobile phones and forward details such as places and times of departure to rescue authorities, to individual activists, or solidarity networks including the Alarm Phone. The majority of boats, often small and made of plastic, leave from the coasts of Tangier, larger and better-equipped ones from Nador. In the early hours of the day, under the cover of darkness, they depart and attempt to move as far north as possible before alerting authorities or solidarity networks. For several years, the most commonly used phones were those that could not transmit GPS positions, but this has changed, recently shifting to the greater use of smart phones that allow users to share precise locations. Once their location is confirmed and ideally in the area where the Spanish SAR organization Salvamento Maritimo conducts rescues, the Alarm Phone notifies the Spanish authorities in the hope that they would reach the boat before the Moroccan Navy could intercept it – a hope regularly disappointed given the information exchanges between Spanish and Moroccan authorities.

Though crossings are first and foremost the enactment of a freedom of movement by migrant subjects, the way they unfold and their intensity also highlight the shifting relationship between Morocco, Spain, and the EU.[iii] Both the rise in arrivals in Spain over the summer of 2018 and the subsequent efforts by Moroccan authorities to curtail further crossings allow insights into the 'borderwork' along this western Mediterranean route (Rumford 2015). In July 2018, Frontex issued a warning concerning the increased arrivals in Spain (Deutsche Welle 2018), while the newly elected Spanish government implemented a range of measures to counter arrivals. Though initially gesturing to a 'softer' stance on migration, the Spanish government did not only begin to search for legal means to deport sub-Saharan migrants from the Spanish enclaves but also enacted several instances of 'hot deportations' during which sub-Saharan migrants were rapidly returned to Morocco after having jumped the border fences and entering EU territory. With rising numbers of arrivals, expectations of Morocco to do more to prevent crossings rose as well. Recent boosts in funding via the European Commission (2018), not least to further militarize the Moroccan border, need to be understood as incentives for Morocco to respond to EUropean fears about the western route.

Moroccan reactions to the long summer of western Mediterranean migration were dramatic. In August and September 2018, Moroccan security forces forcibly removed more than two thousand migrants, irrespective of gender, age, or residence status, from the cities of Nador and Tangier to the south of Morocco, including three members of the Alarm Phone. As one of them wrote:

> *I can never forget this day, the 11th of September. It was like a nightmare. In the six years that I have lived in Morocco, I have never seen practices as cruel as these. This violence is not justified – let's hope it will stop... (Alarm Phone, 2018d)*

Besides repression on land, interceptions of migrant boats increased, as the Alarm Phone directly witnessed in mid-September:

> *Western Med - A week of Movement, A week of Repression: Last week, we supported 17 boats in distress in the Western Mediterranean Sea. Of these 17 boats, 14 were intercepted by the Moroccan Navy, 2 were rescued to Spain, and 1 boat returned to Morocco independently. The many interceptions show that the crack-down in Morocco on migrant travellers is not confined to the land, where thousands have been violently arrested and deported south over the past weeks. Under European and Spanish pressure, Moroccan forces are trying to intercept and return as many people at sea as possible. (Alarm Phone, 2018c)*

As in other (North African) regions, the EU border regime depends on Morocco's collaboration and compliance in the outsourcing of borders, but it is important not to neglect Morocco's own role in the border regime and its logics of othering. Rather than simply forming a passive warden of the EU and Spain, Morocco engages in the politics over mobility as well (Cherti and Collyer, 2015; El Qadim, 2018), often using (the threat of) migrant crossings to bargain for more favorable agreements, or to buy silence on contentious human rights issues. More than that, the existence of a deep-rooted and institutionalized anti-black racism, which Laura Menin (2016: 22) describes "as a multi-faceted and historically specific phenomenon which is deeply entangled in contemporary socio-political and economic circumstances" needs to be acknowledged as a factor in the often-repressive measures targeting the sub-Saharan communities in the Moroccan kingdom.

Prefigurative Struggles beyond the Sea

The embeddedness of the Alarm Phone in contested practices of human movement reveals important insights into the workings of the EUropean border regime and its interplay with 'disobedient' mobilities (Heller, Pezzani and Stierl 2017). Having experienced the break-down of the EU border regime in 2015 and subsequent attempts to restore its capacity to thwart unauthorized crossings, the Alarm Phone's continuous presence and work renders decipherable the regime's mechanics and transformation over time, repeatedly bringing to light what is meant to remain hidden. Listening to the stories and struggles of thousands on the move and assisting them in a variety of ways has revealed not merely a variety of migrant mobilities but also the shifting forces that seek to deter, capture, and contain them. Mobilities and attempts to govern them have constituted the Mediterranean as a conflictual borderzone, where precarious movements are both the result of restrictive migration policies and forces of defiance.

In order to intervene at the 'nexus of "movement as politics" and "movement as motion"' (Mitropoulos and Neilson, 2006) and become a segment of a migratory 'underground railroad', the Alarm Phone had to find a constantly evolving transborder shape. Being situated in a variety of places on both sides of the Mediterranean Sea was not merely a political choice but a necessity. With EUropean borders becoming increasing delocalized, outsourced, and externalized, such transversal solidarity was essential to engage in the world of subversive mobilities, but also in seeking to be or become prefigurative in form, challenging and (re-) connecting the spaces that are broken up by (sovereign and other) borders, borders that are meant to demarcate between an inside and outside, an us and them. In its desire to continuously re-make a global frontier and maintain a segregationist status quo, EUrope multiplies its borders throughout society and space. Not least when some of its members are deported to the south of Morocco or even to their 'countries of origin', or when visa restrictions make it impossible for some to attend larger gatherings, it becomes visible within the Alarm Phone network itself how hegemonic borders cut not only through geographic spaces and regions, but through the social itself, through fabrics of friendship and community. In a small way, though, the Alarm Phone seeks to contest these multiple division-making practices. It aspires to be an infrastructure of sorts, one that sustains movement across artificial and often violent borders, and one that amplifies the voices from the sea – voices routinely misconceived as simply expressing desperation and victimhood while in fact claiming the right to move, and the right to arrive alive.

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[ii] The term 'EUrope' problematizes frequently employed usages that equate the European Union with Europe and Europe with the EU and suggests, at the same time, that EUrope is not reducible to the institutions of the EU.

[iii] Such a changing relationship is not dependent merely on questions of migration 'management' but also on other, often conflictual, issues, including economic relations or Morocco's occupation of the western Sahara – a discussion of which, however, would exceed the scope of this article.